

Court offers scofflaws a chance to pay up

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By CATHERINE KAVANAUGH
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BERKLEY – District Court 45-A is owed \$1.2 million from individuals who haven't paid ticket fines or misdemeanor penalties, but Judge Jamie Wittenberg will go easy on everyone who settles up the week of June 22.

A fee forgiveness program could save some scofflaws up to \$5,000, according to Jodi R. Debbrecht, court administrator and magistrate.

"They might think, 'I can't pay that, why pay anything,'" Debbrecht said. "We're very empathetic to the economy, but we want to hold people accountable, too. Our motive is to give people a break if they can't afford what they owe us."

From June 22-26, the court, at 3338 Coolidge, will forgive up to 50 percent of the fines, late fees and outstanding costs for people with unpaid parking tickets, traffic violations and misdemeanors, such as vandalism, shoplifting and disorderly conduct.

Defendants also will be able to save themselves aggravation from bench warrants, which judges issue to authorize the arrest of someone in contempt for ignoring court dates and fines.

In addition, the Secretary of State tracks unpaid district court costs.

The state tacks on its own default fees and notifies the delinquent person to pay. If payment isn't made, the state suspends the driver's license and adds another late fee.

Then, the next time the person has a brush with police, he or she can be arrested for the bench warrant or driving with a suspended license.

"Then you've got to post bond and it becomes a disruption in your life," Debbrecht said. "Most people don't understand the administrative consequences."

No appointments are needed to seek fee forgiveness. The court administrator and judge will make payment arrangements on a case-by-case basis.

After June 26, the court will use other means to collect payments. Individuals will get notices in the mail that the court plans to garnish their wages, tax refunds or paychecks. The court also will charge for the collection program.

"We're one of the smallest district courts in Michigan, so for us to have \$1.2 million in outstanding receivables is an extreme amount," Debbrecht said. "We're looking for a resolution."

In 2008, a similar program offering amnesty from late fees only reportedly brought in \$30,000 from overdue tickets.

During the week of leniency, the court won't be able to reduce all fees.

"State costs aren't waiveable," Debbrecht said of penalties assessed by the secretary of state and Michigan Department of Treasury.

The fee forgiveness program is aimed at individuals whose unpaid court bills accrued prior to January but recent payment issues will be considered.

"If someone was ticketed for something in 2009, we'll give them a break as well to clear up the infraction," Debbrecht said.

FYI

For more information about the program or to find out if an arrangement can be made to pay by mail, call the court at (248) 658-3400.